

## THE INTRICACIES OF THE PERSUASIVE SELLER: THE POWER OF MITIGATION

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### Resumen

Tomando como punto de partida el modelo de cortesía desarrollado por Brown y Levinson (1978, 1987) y las diversas teorías lingüísticas de los actos de habla (Austin 1962, Searle 1976), pretendo llevar a cabo una aproximación a la noción de mitigación dentro de un corpus de anuncios publicitarios americanos en televisión. Mi hipótesis de partida consiste en considerar que la necesaria descripción del producto y de sus cualidades debe realizarse de forma tentativa y nunca categórica. Éste parece ser el principal motivo de la puesta en marcha de algunas estrategias de cortesía negativa o mitigación que permiten presentar el producto y mantener la necesaria atención a la imagen del interlocutor, la cual se amenazada con la mera emisión del anuncio publicitario: así como la atención a la imagen del propio hablante como responsable del producto presentado. De esta manera, se atiende también al aspecto interpersonal de la interacción.

**Palabras clave:** cortesía lingüística-estrategias de cortesía negativa o mitigación (Brown y Levinson), anuncio publicitario como macro-acto de habla (Van Dijk, 1977), relaciones interpersonales.

### Abstract

Drawing on politeness theories (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987) and the linguistic theories of speech acts (Searle 1962, Austin 1976), I attempt an approach to the notion of negative politeness or mitigation in the discourse of American TV commercials. It is my underlying contention that the presentation of the product and the description of its payoffs and characteristics pose a threat to the audience's negative face (that is to say, their freedom of action) and thus calls for mitigation or redressive action of some sort. By means of negative politeness strategies the speaker maintains the necessary attention to the interlocutor's needs for negative face and to his/her own needs for face and softens any imposition embodied in the emission of the TV commercial. As a result, social relationships between interlocutors are also maintained.

**Key words:** linguistic politeness, negative politeness strategies or mitigation (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), TV commercial as a macro-speech act (Van Dijk 1977), interpersonal relationships.

### Résumé

Suivant le modèle de politesse de Brown et Levinson (1978, 1987) et les différentes théories linguistiques des actes de parole (Austin 1962, Searle 1976) j'essai de m'approcher à la notion de fonction adoucissante dans une collection des spots publicitaires américains à la télévision. Mon hypothèse initiale propose considérer que la nécessaire description du produit et de ses qualités doit se faire d'une façon tentative et non catégorique. Cela semble être la principale raison

de la mise en marche de quelques stratégies de politesse négative ou fonction adoucissante qui permettent présenter le produit et maintenir la nécessaire attention à l'image de l'interlocuteur, qui es menacé avec la simple émission du spot publicitaire, ainsi comme faire attention à l'image du parlant comme responsable du produit présenté. De cette façon, on fait attention à l'aspect interpersonnel de l'interaction.

**Mots clés:** politesse linguistique -stratégies de politesse négative ou fonction adoucissante (Brown et Levinson 1978, 1987), spot publicitaire comme macro-acte de parole (Van Dijk 1977) relations interpersonnelles.

## Sumario

1. Introduction. 2. The special roles of the Speaker (S) and Hearer (H) in the TV commercial. 3. Mitigation in the corpora: an analysis of Brown and Levinson's negative politeness postulates. 4. Conclusions. 5. References.

## 1. Introduction

Advertising is something that is always with us, whenever we turn on the TV or radio, read the newspapers, magazines, or even billboards on the streets, we are constantly bombarded with lots of advertisements and commercials, even if we do not notice it. Advertising is part of our society as a loyal reflection of the current trends and social values of it. Moreover, and most importantly, advertising is a form of communication (Vestergaard and Schroder 1985, Geis 1982, Leech 1966) where a number of persons are at the same time communicating with each other and with an anonymous audience. On TV, the communication situation is a very peculiar one since the kind of channel through which the message is communicated is made up of waves, and images, along with sound. All these elements contribute in the creation of a particular context and make up for the lack of a real face-to-face conversational exchange to a certain extent. The fact that participants are not addressing each other face to face, that the commercial participates of a particular time and place deixis, along with the fact that the channel is not a tangible one, help create a metaphorical distance between interlocutors, although the exchange tends to reproduce everyday natural occurring conversation.

Besides that, the linguistic message is normally about the product, an attempt to convince the hearer to buy it. Advertising language has been described as purely persuasive and only superficially informative (Lakoff 1982). Authors such as Vestergaard and Schroder (1985: 9) consider that the main reason is because the moment it appeals to our emotions or feelings advertising is said to cross the threshold of information and enter the realm of persuasion. However, the transmission of information about the product is always an important part of the commercial even if it disputably has an underlying persuasive goal. In the type of commercial that Leech (1966: 25) identifies as *commercial consuming advertising* is very common that the speaker (hereafter S) offers certain amount of information about the product, ranging from promises about its payoffs, claims about its price, affordability, or even reasons why we should call or buy it<sup>1</sup>. All this information is transmitted by means of different intermediate illocutionary acts that make up what I call the *macro-speech act* of the TV commercial (Van Dijk 1977). These intermediate speech

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1 The different ways of suggesting the purchase of the product is the topic of another article "Getting the prospective buyer into action: explicit and implicit mechanisms in TV advertising (2000 b), in print.

acts (claims, promises, orders, etc.) have a clear illocutionary force, that of a *directive*: to change the beliefs, behavior and course of action of the hearer (hereafter H). In this line of reasoning, the TV commercial is interpreted as a *suggestion or advice*, that S gives to H, with a clear illocutionary force: to persuade H into purchasing a product or service.

*Directives* are considered, following Brown & Levinson's classification of speech acts, *Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)*. Therefore, the emission of a commercial poses a threat to H's negative face, since it may be taken as an infringement on H's freedom of action, i.e. the audience may consider that they do not need the product advertised, or the recommendation or suggestion to purchase it, etc. Moreover, by being intrusive, S is thus neglecting or damaging his/her positive face and exposing it to criticism on the part of H. The H may think low of a particular S who is intrusive and seems to impose his/her will. Therefore, the threat embodied in the commercial goes in two directions: S poses a threat to H's negative face, and in doing so, is inevitably exposing his/her own positive face (his/her desire to be admired by others) to negative criticism. It is important to consider that both images, the negative and the positive, are complementary in that any attempt to preserve our positive image entails the preservation of the interlocutor's negative one. Therefore, a close link between these two sides of the concept of face is established. Moreover, any action that is seen as offensive on the part of an individual, and is not immediately redressed, will inevitably menace his/her positive image. This duality embodied in the concept of face forces the S to set off different mechanisms or devices for the attention to both participants' face-needs.

Considering all these aspects, I attempt with this paper an analysis of the role that *mitigation* plays in the linguistic codification of the commercial message. The underlying hypothesis is that *mitigation* will help in the maintenance of social relationships between interlocutors, by softening and weakening the unwelcome effect that the commercial may exert on H. As has been said before, the emission of the commercial poses a certain threat to the H's negative face, and exposes to criticism the S's one. Mitigation will be mainly geared towards the softening of claims about the product, thus making the emission of the commercial not so imposing on the H's will or freedom of action. This course of action on the part of S will inevitably redound to his/her own benefit, as responsible for the product.

Finally, it would be also interesting to note that most of the parts I have identified as making up the conventional structure of the commercial will be mitigated or softened to some extent. These parts mainly coincide with Lund's (1947: 83) classification of the task of an adman as being to 1. Attract attention. 2. Arouse interest. 3. Stimulate desire. 4. Create conviction, and 5. Get action<sup>2</sup>. These parts or stages in the emission of a commercial, which tend to overlap most of the times, and are as follows:

- a) the singling out of the audience. One way of selecting the prospective buyer is to indicate that the H may have a certain problem or need that has to be fulfilled. The presentation of the product itself attends to the audience's needs and aims to provide them with a solution.

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2 Another interesting and quite similar classification of what an advertisement must accomplish and what its different stages are is the one provided by Leech (1966: 27).

- b) the presentation of the product: we usually find claims about the product, its qualities, benefits or countless payoffs, affordability, low prices, etc. Sometimes, these claims are implicitly or explicitly conveyed and products are compared to others belonging to the same class.
- c) Reasons that point to the convenience of the product and justifications of why the S thinks the purchase reasonable are, almost always, a *sine qua non* in the discourse of advertising.
- d) Offers, or promises about the product are also very common, either explicitly or implicitly stated. By means of a promise, the H is given reasons as to why we should buy the product.

It goes without saying that in the different stages of the commercial, S has to carefully select the conversational strategies that he/she is going to use to persuade and simultaneously attend to the audience needs. Therefore, mitigation would lie at the very heart of this type of discourse.

Before we proceed with this presentation, it would be necessary to explain the special relevance of the roles played by the speaker and hearer for the special purposes of this type of discourse. As Brown & Levinson recognized, S and H have a *positive* and a *negative face*, thus resulting in a maximum of four faces that can become involved in the interactional process of communication, what makes the coding of social relationships a complex process. Moreover, it is Leech's (1966: 33) contention that when we move from a situation of *private communication* to one of *public communication*, as is the case in the TV commercial, we encounter complications, as far as the identities of the participants are concerned. In the following two sections I aim to elucidate the special roles of speaker and hearer for further considerations of facework in the discourse of TV commercials.

## **2. The special roles of the Speaker (S) and Hearer (H) in the TV commercial.**

### **2.1. Speaker (S)**

The speaker (S) or advertiser is the entity responsible for the emission of the commercial. In fact, he/she is not a single person, but "an abstract assemblage of people: the organization which commissions and pays for the advertising" (Leech 1966: 33). His/her identity may be disguised as that of a *voice over*, a real ordinary character directly addressing the audience (*primary situation*), a celebrity, or he/she may be just presenting an imaginary situation which the audience may feel identified with (*secondary situation*). In any of these cases, his/her interest coincides with that of the advertising company as responsible for the product. Therefore, the speaker, as responsible for the product and the brand name advertised, has to carefully project his/her image in the conversational exchange since his/her success will depend on the ability to successfully craft the message in the conversational exchange, without neglecting or abashing his/her interlocutor's face, but just the opposite, while preserving his/her face-needs in the exchange.

Therefore, Ss have to simultaneously attend to their interlocutor's face-needs, specially their need for negative face: not to be imposing with the emission of the TV commercial; while attending to their own positive face, even if they already have one, or to the creation of one, since it is of prime importance that the speaker gain his/her interlocutor trust and

admiration in the conversational exchange. If H values the product, this value will inevitably redound to the speaker's benefit as responsible for the product and to the enhancement of his/her positive face or prestige in front of the prospective audience.

In some cases, the speaker has a positive face already, that is to say, he/she is known by the audience, as well as the good quality of his/her products. In those cases, speakers only need to maintain the good image they have in front of the audience, or most important, enhance it, whenever possible. In those cases where the product is brand new or almost brand new, speakers need to devote more attention to the careful crafting of the message. Their main aim is then to attend to their interactional goals and the face-needs of the participants of the exchange and to build up a certain prestige or charisma in the advertising market.

As a result, the conversational exchange that takes place in the emission of the TV commercial between a S and a H does not differ much, in terms of face needs, from real conversational exchanges, where participants project their images, attend to their interlocutor's needs to achieve their interactional goals and abide by the social aspect of interaction as well.

## **2.2. Hearer (H)**

The hearer (H) or prospective consumer, as the individual that decodes the commercial, may, inevitably, have a negative attitude towards the coding of the message, since it is common knowledge that commercials have the purpose of selling the product they advertise. The underlying thesis of this work is that the commercial poses a FTA to the H's negative face. However, there is a certain metaphorical distance created by means of the special deixis elements: "now" and "here" in which the exchange takes place, together with the channel, the TV, that allows H to end the conversational exchange whenever he/she feels like. All these postulates may weaken the assertion that the commercial embodies a macro-face threatening act for the H's negative face. However, I maintain these postulates for the purpose of this paper, and to further explain the role of mitigation in the commercial. It is also my contention that S may feel he/she is not doing everything all right with the emission of the commercial, otherwise, he/she would not devote so much importance to the mitigation of his/her claims about the product and the presupposition of the audience's needs. Speakers are aware of the fact that, to persuade H and maintain the harmonious equilibrium between interactants, they need to be tentative and never categorical when it comes to the presentation of the product and to the pointing of existing needs that H may have regarding the product. Their strategies of persuasion do not differ from the ones used in natural occurring conversations when persuasion is of prime importance to gain the interlocutor's agreement and cooperation.

## **3. Mitigation in the corpora: an analysis of Brown and Levinson's negative politeness postulates.**

In this paper I am mainly interested in the use of negative politeness strategies with a mitigatory or softening purpose, as postulated by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). As I have mentioned before, mitigation affects, primarily, the presentation of claims about the

product. However, all the different parts that integrate the structure of the commercial are, to a certain extent, mitigated. For the linguistic codification of negative politeness I draw on the generic strategies and sub-strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). The corpora analyzed is made up of around 60 American TV commercials that integrate all types of commercials of the type defined as *consuming commercial advertising*, drawing on Leech (1966: 25). These commercials were fragmented into utterances for the analysis and codification of linguistic politeness.

Different mechanism for the encoding of negative politeness have been found in the corpora and noted. Among them, I mainly focus on the following sub-strategies: P-7: *"Impersonalize, avoid the pronouns you and I"*, P-8: *"State the FTA as a general rule"*, and P-9: *"Nominalize"*, that belong to the generic strategy "Communicate S's want to not impinge on H, dissociating S, H from the particular infringement". Of particular interest are also strategies P-2: *"Question, hedge"* along with P-1: *"Be conventionally indirect"*, corresponding to the generic strategies "Make minimal assumptions about H's wants or needs", and "Don't coerce H". These different sub-strategies are also illustrated to further indicate how they relate with the different parts of the commercial and comply with notions of face.

### **3.1. "Communicate S's want to not impinge on H, dissociating S, H from the particular infringement".**

It is beneficial for S to communicate that it is not his/her desire to impose on H or infringe his/her personal territory, or freedom of action. For that very purpose, S makes use of different devices by means of which he/she appears as a rational individual who, conscious of his/her intrusion on H's territory, aims to mitigate it, whenever possible. The payoffs that Ss obtained are mainly directed to the enhancement of their own face, specially, their positive face. Below, some of the most common devices found to achieve this purpose are illustrated.

#### *P-7: Impersonalization and avoidance of the pronouns 'You' and 'I'.*

By means of this strategy, the speaker's identity, as responsible for the FTA, is somewhat disguised. S and H are dissociated from the particular infringement and, thus, S communicates his desire not to impinge on H. Two main devices have been identified for the codification of this mechanism that corresponds to the strategy number P+7 in Brown and Levinson's framework of negative politeness:

- a) The use of the *passive voice*. Following Brown and Levinson (1987: 194), "the passive coupled with a rule of agent deletion is perhaps the means par excellence in English of avoiding reference to persons involved in the FTAs". The lack of overt agent reference brings about a certainly more scientific rigor to this type of discourse. Notwithstanding, the use of the passive voice does not only redress the FTA, attending to H's negative-face wants, but it also enhances and emphasizes S's positive face, so exposed to criticisms and negative evaluation on the part of H.

Mitigation by means of this sub-strategy mainly applies to the presentation of claims about the product's qualities, excellencies, and to the signaling of the scientific trial, that

is to say, commercials usually justify the excellencies of the product by referring to different trials or tests that the product has undergone before it has been entitled with a certain degree of prestige.

In the following extracts, the use of the passive voice apparently disguises the real identity of the agent of the scientific trials that these products have undergone: *Nizoral shampoo* has been specifically formulated by a board of their experts to kill the yeast; and *Neutrogena hand-working cream* has been clinically proven by people from their company or working for them. The same happens in the extract from *L'oréal*, where the passive voice is used to present and emphasize a quality of the product since it contains a U-V filter that protects and revitalizes. Similarly, the passive voice is used whenever the product is tested on clinical, medical or scientific grounds with the clear intention of offering the best product and the best quality to the audience. We all value aspects such as products tested before and approved by experts on the medical or scientific fields.

The speaker, as responsible for the commercial, creates a metaphorical distance between him/her and the prospective buyer by means of this device, and thus complies with facework in two complementary ways: S protects the interlocutor's negative face and his/her own positive face.

NIZORAL.

[...] <sup>3</sup>(5) Nizoral dandruff shampoo is a treatment as different from others you bought before (6) *specifically formulated* (P-7) to actually kill the yeast.

NEUTROGENA.

[...] (2) Neutrogena *is clinically proven* (P-7) to give immediate relief.

L'ORÉAL:

(1) I won't play true or death with my color (2) I shampoo with Color Vive by L'oréal

Voice-over (1) *Color Vive's formulated with a U-V filter to protect and revitalize every strength* (P-7).

PAMPERS RASH GUARD.

(1) You've tried SO many things to make her diaper rash go away (2) But you've never tried a diaper /.../ (3) Introducing Pampers Rash Guard (4) The first diaper *specially designed* to help treat AND prevent diaper rash (P-7) // (3) with a hypoallergenic protector that helps skin stay healthy (4) it's also the diaper *clinically proven* to help protect against diaper rash.

- b) The use of the *brand name* and the manufacturer's trade name advertised can be considered another impersonal device that masks, to some degree, the real identity of the speaker as responsible for the product. Brand names play a key role in the discourse of advertising and sometimes, through a fictionalization process, they become animated entities that present the product, offer, or promise payoffs to H. As a result, a transfer of identities seems to take place, whereby responsibility for the FTA is diluted.

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3 The use of this device[...] indicates that there are some other utterances before the ones I exemplify.

However, although this mechanism avoids the use of the personal pronoun “I” or “we”, it also participates of an emphatic function in this type of discourse. The use of a brand name that is well known to H and enshrines certain charisma, helps soften and minimize the imposition of the FTA. Simultaneously, by means of this device Ss enhance their positive face by showing some concern for H and by offering him/her a brand that is well known. In the following examples, we can appreciate how the brand names act as human entities, performing actions that redound to our only advantage: *Prilosec* provides heartburn relief, *New Olay beauty Mascara* curls and de-tangles your lashes, *Whirlpool* gets your clothes cleaner, etc.:

WHIRLPOOL

[...] (7) *Whirlpool* (P-7) gets your clothes cleaner // (8) and lets you run fewer loads //

PRIOLOSEC

[...] (8) it's *Prilosec* time // (9) Time to see your doctor about prescribing *Prilosec* // (10) Your results may vary // (11) but for many people *Prilosec* (P-7) provides 24 hours of complete heartburn relief with one daily dose.

OLAYNEWBEAUTYMASCARA

Voice-over (1) Introducing *Olay new beauty Mascara* // (2) Of all *Mascaras*' curls ours go further // (3) *Olay's* comb like brush, curls and de-tangles (P-7) // (4) while our vitamins and rich formula defines and sets to give your lashes volume and lift // (5) the lavish of their color lasts all day // (6) *New beauty Mascara* from *Olay Cosmetics*.

The global effect of these sub-strategies seems to facilitate the stating of claims about the product and its qualities through the dilution of the real identity of S. Thus, his/her responsibility for any criticism that may derive from the claims about the product is also attenuated. In conclusion, these strategies above mentioned are secondarily directed towards the S's need for facework, but also primarily towards the preservation of H's negative face.

- c) The use of verb tenses other than the present tense, especially *preterits* and *conditionals forms*. Ss attempt to create some temporal distance between interlocutors and disassociate them from the “here” and “now” where the action takes place.

These strategies have also been defined as *point-of-view distancing devices*. Haverkate (1994: 143) talks about the *conditional of mitigation* to refer to hypothetical situations where, by means of the conditional form, the force of the assertion or question is certainly weakened. For example, the use of a conditional form in a question helps present a hypothetical situation to H, or the insertion of a conditional form in an assertion, like in the *Injury Help Line* commercial, weakens its force, thus the S in this commercial recommends that we talk to a lawyer because he “would explain” our rights. The use of the conditional avoids being categorical about this assertion. Moreover, the S cannot be held responsible for the truth expressed. Similarly, in the *Peoples Prescription Plan* commercial the lady states that the card “would give me the lowest price”. In this dialogue or mini-drama the woman that is invested with some authority (*expertise power*, drawing on Thomas 1995) does not categorically state that the card “will give her the lowest price”. Instead of making use of the future simple, and thus, being more categorical by pointing to some kind



of promise (If it works for me, it will work for you), regarding the use of the card, she chooses to make use of a conditional form that weakens the force of the assertion and makes it more palatable for the audience or H.

BRITANNIC ASSURANCE.

(1) How *would* (P-7) you manage if your kids make it to university?

INJURY HELPLINE.

(7) Talk to a lawyer near you for free // (8) one (P-7) who *would* explain your rights.

PEOPLES PRESCRIPTION PLAN.

A (1) Nancy?

B (1) Jill!

A (2) Hey! I think you dropped something.

B (2) Thanks, I *wouldn't* wanna lose this card (P-7).

A (3) what's that? Your insurance card?

B (3) No, but just as important. (4) It's by Peoples Prescription Plan. (5) This would give me the lowest prices at my next stop at the pharmacy. [...]

Again, the use of tenses different from the present tense, helps mitigate the presentation of claims about the product's payoffs. In the following extract, we are faced with a monologue (indirect address situation) where the tenses have been shifted from the present tense to the past tense. Thus, the primary character is explaining the reasons why she chose KY Silk-e and distancing the action from the moment where the interaction takes place. By justifying her choice, she mitigates any negative unwelcome effect the commercial may have on the audience:

17. KY SILK-E.

(1) My doctor said occasional personal dryness is natural // (2) she *recommended* KY (P-7) // (3) I chose New Ky Silk-e // (4) Nothing feels more natural

### 3.2 "Make minimal assumptions about H's wants or needs", and "Don't coerce H".

As we have already stated, it is of prime importance for S not to make explicit assumptions about H's wants or needs and, specially, about H's desire to buy the product. Abiding by this postulate will bring about important benefits for H and will help make explicit his/her intention not to coerce with the emission of the commercial.

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) identified different sub-strategies under this generic strategy and now I turn attention to the mechanisms available to comply with this second most important generic strategy (that of giving options not to do the FTA). Among the sub-strategies that integrate this output, *P-2: Question, Mitigate* is one of the most pervasive in the analysis of the corpora. The questioning and mitigation is aimed to weaken claims about the product or H's needs or wants for it. With the presentation of the product, the speaker or advertiser aims to convince H that the product is of interest to him/her, and that the commodity will satisfy some need or create one (Leech 1966: 49). However, the more succinct the argument, the better the willingness or disposition on the part of the audience. Among the most common devices for the codification of this sub-strategy, the following stand out:

- a) The use of *hedges*. Hedges are usually directed to mitigate the illocutionary force of one of the Cooperative Principle's maxims (CP). Brown and Levinson (1987: 146) consider that the CP maxims are: "the source of strong background assumptions about cooperation, informativeness, truthfulness, relevance, and clarity, which on many occasions need to be softened for reasons of face". Together with these devices, it is also worth mentioning the use of epistemic verbs such as "think", or "believe", used to hedge either commitment or assertiveness (Hyland 1998).

The use of hedges in our corpora has a very clear function: hedges help mitigate the possible unwelcome effect that the commercial may have on H. Sometimes, this is achieved by indicating that the price or the effort to purchase the product are minimal. Among them, "*just*" stands out as one of the most pervasive in the corpus analyzed. *Just* is usually found with imperatives that advise H to some sort of action, either implicitly or explicitly. As we can observe in the following extracts, a celebrity (Joan Linder) suggests us that we use *Claritin*, and one way of mitigating the imposition is by indicating that *Claritin* will not be a hindrance at all since "just one tablet brings 24 hours of non-drowsy relief...". Values such as accessibility of use are also praised, for example in commercials such as the *HUD and FHA* or the *10-10-321* and the *People's Prescription Plan*, the only requisite is to dial a number to get the best fare; or show our card to get the lowest price that a plan on prescriptions can offer:

CLARITIN: With Joan Linder.

(1) It's here! // (2) Allergy season // (3) and if you suffer like I do // (4) you can stay indoors and miss all this // (5) or talk to your doctor about Claritin // (6) *Just* (P-2) one tablet brings 24 hours of non-drowsy relief from seasonal allergy symptoms.

PEOPLES PRESCRIPTION PLAN.

[...] Voice-over (1) That's why you should call now to join the People Prescription Plan // (2) Now *just* (P-2) for one low monthly fee // (3) you get the lowest price this plan can offer // (4) In fact our members have already saved over twenty million dollars on their prescription drugs // (5) Get up to half of the cost of eyes glasses // (6) and contact lenses // (7) You can also save on hearing aids, vitamins // (8) even health equipment // (9) *It's easy* // (10) *Just* (P-2) show your prescription card // (11) and there's no claim forms // (12) So call today // (13) Call 1-800-356-2600.

10-10-321.

[...] (3) because now you can call anyone across America for *just* 8 cents a minutes // (4) calls for over 8 m // (5) all day // (6) EVERY day // (7) just dial 10-10-321 // (8) and you can talk as long as you want to the people you care about the most // (9) You don't have to sign up // (10) *Just* (P-2) dial 10-10-321 // (11) then 1 and the number // (12) it's that simple.

Other hedges, such as "*only*" help mitigate the outlay on the product or service, including a numerical figure that is thus softened; or sometimes, they are redressive in that they emphasize the exclusive qualities that the product may have, thus providing evidence for its purchase: *Pediacin* is the only medicated and the only one specially made to relieve foot pain, and *I-800-BRINKS* only costs 49\$, what appeals to the reasonableness of the purchase.

PEDIACIN.

[...] A (2) Is Pediacin really different?

Voice over (3) YES! // (4) Pediacin is the *only* (P-2) medicated gel that works two ways // (5) It dissolves in water for instant pain relief // (6) Then when pores open // (7) rubs in deeper for long lasting relief // (8) No ordinary rubbers soak hoarse like that.

A (3) There's nothing like Pediacin // (4) The pain is GONE!

Voice over (9) *Only* (P-2) Pediacin is specially made to relieve all kinds of foot pains.

Other relevant hedges found in our corpora are the following:

ACUVUE:

(1) Introducing the new Acuvue 2 // (2) the contact lens reinvented // (3) it's *incredibly* (P-2) comfortable // (4) comfortable to put in // (5) comfortable to wear // (6) it's the first with intelligent contour design // (7) so natural it feels like (P-2) you're wearing nothing at all // (8) For a free trial pair call us // (9) or visit your eye care professional // (10) New Acuvue 2.

CIRCUIT CITY:

(1) At Circuit City we understand that you have other things to do than laundry // (2) that's why we have the latest washers and dryers designed with technology // (3) to make your life a *little* (P-2) easier // (4) like the new Whirlpool ultimate Care 2 washer // (5) with its exclusive extra-volume agitator // (6) and super capacity // (7) Whirlpool gets your clothes cleaner // (8) and lets you run fewer loads // (9) Right now get the new ultimate Care from *only* 399\$ (P-2) // (10) plus a free 6 month supply of Tide detergent // (11) Today at Circuit City.

PAMPERS RASH GUARD.

(1) You've tried SO many things to make her diaper rash go away (2) But you've never tried a diaper /.../ (3) Introducing Pampers Rash Guard (4) The first diaper *specially* (P-2) designed to help treat AND prevent diaper rash (3) with a hypoallergenic protector that helps skin stay healthy (4) it's also the diaper clinically proven to help protect against diaper rash (5) Day after day, it's the revolutionary way to pamper the skin they're in (6) New Pampers Rash Guard.

- b) *Adverbial-clause hedges*. With the use of "if-clauses", felicity conditions may be suspended (Heringer (1972) in Brown and Levinson (1987)), offering the option to not to carry out the FTA. This use of the if-conditional has also been referred to as *conditional of mitigation* (Haverkate 1994).

STANDARD LIFE PENSION.

[...] B (5) *If* (P-2) they say something's right // (6) you don't argue with them.

AMERICAN ONLINE.

B (1) *If* you (P-2) have a phone line // (2) you can go on line.

NIZORAL.

[...] (3) because this could be the last time you see it // (4) *if* (P-2) you start using this.

PFIZER.

[...] (7) that's why we *believe* (P-2) we'll introduce more new medicines for more diseases than anyone else.

In the corpora, these devices play a key role, in that it is beneficial for S to make use of these tentative or softening devices when it comes to the stating of claims on behalf of the product. The use of hedges allows S to weaken the commitment to the truth of the expressed proposition, and thus, indicate that what he/she states does not necessarily has to be taken as a rule of thumb by H. By means of these devices, S attends to H's negative-face needs for autonomy and independence, and reinforces his/her own positive face. If the qualities supposedly attached to the product did not turn out to be as positive as stated in the commercial, S cannot be held responsible for it. Thus, being tentative and never categorical when making assertions is the most recommended course of action. Sounding too imposing would be a detriment to S's desire to persuade H to buying the product. Moreover, with the use of the conditional "if", S avoids any presumption about H's eagerness or willingness to do the act and it also provides H an "opt out", in case they do not identify with the audience to which the commercial is addressed. The use of the conditional is also used to express a condition necessary for the fulfillment of a promise. Therefore, all the payoffs promised are dependent on the condition of purchasing the product or service advertised.

The next sub-strategy, *P-1: Be conventionally indirect*, is another mitigation device. It involves the use of modal verbs with an *epistemic* use, concerning the modality of reasoning and belief. The use of modal verbs, specially the distal forms *could*, *would*, *should* and *might*, express tentativeness and help to offer H an "out" in carrying out the act. By means of these devices, S does not categorically commit to the truth of the words contained in the FTA and the hearer is not forced to accept a forthright insistence on the recognition of a claim (Hyland 1998: 113). Moreover, with the use of modality the speaker shows *affective meaning* and the intention to create a relationship with the reader, thus conveying politeness. In the discourse of advertising, the use of modal verbs is confined to the forms *may/might* and *could*, all of them to express possibility and hypotheticality. However, I have also corroborated the use of the modal form *can* combining the *root* and *epistemic* meanings, though it is extremely unusual to find the use of an *epistemic can* in the affirmative. I will comment on its use below.

In the following extracts, the speaker gives reasons as to why he/she thinks that we should start using *Procrit* if we are chemo patients. *Procrit* helps regain red blood cells and "more red blood cells can mean more strength". Instead of claiming that this is going to be the case, the use of the modal helps to soften the assertion: "It is possible that more red blood cells equal more strength". However, the *root* meaning is maintained in the use, thus "more red blood cells have the ability to provide more strength". The use of the modal *can* combines the *root* meaning of "ability" with that of "possibility" as a polite device. The author points tentatively in the *Hud and FHA* commercial to certain problems in their house that may be good reasons for the hearer to contact this company if he/she wants to be safe at home. Therefore, the speaker never states that there are dangers in the hearers' house, what can be seen as imposing or offensive for the hearer, neither does he/she point to the fact that there are improperly wired outlets that will electric H, or coolers that will burn him, etc. By just pointing to the possibility of all these problems, the speaker is more prone to achieve his/her goals of persuading and influencing than by openly stating that the hearer has some very special needs or some problems that need to be solved.

HUD AND FHA:

(1) Hi, I'm Bill // (2) You know your home is your sanctuary // (3) The one place where you and your children *should* (P-1) be all safe // (4) but there *can* (P-1) be dangers too // (5) and some of them are not so obvious // (6) improperly wired outlet that *can* (P-1) electric you // (7) water coolers that *can* (P-1) burn // (8) household cleaners that *can* (P-1) kill // (9) let paint that *can* (P-1) poison // (10) to find all about them call HUD // (11) For a free brochure on HUD healthy houses and FHA loans // (12) just call 1-800-HUDS-FHA // (13) HUD and FHA are on your side.

PROCRT.

Voice over (1) Are you a chemotherapy patient? // (2) Ask your doctor about Procrit // (3) Procrit is a natural way to regain red blood cells lost during chemotherapy // (4) and more red blood cells *can* (P-1) mean more strength // (5) Procrit is safe and effective.

Similarly, when introducing Prilosec for heartburn, the speaker indicates that they have a solution for a problem that it is likely to be the output of acid reflux disease. However, by means of the tentative modal *may*, the imposition is thus not perceived as so. Again, when pointing to the favorable results that we may obtain with the use of Prilosec, they indicate that these results "may vary". As can be observed, the speaker is better off just by not claiming anything about the results, what would commit him/her to the truth of the proposition.

PRIOSEC.

(1) It's time // (2) time for your heartburn to take in // (3) because your heartburn relief gave out // (4) It happens 2 or 3 times a week // (5) even though you've treated it and changed your diet // (6) That frequent persistent heartburn *may* (P-1) be due to acid reflux disease // (7) potentially serious // (8) it's Prilosec time // (9) Time to see your doctor about prescribing Prilosec // (10) Your results *may* (P-1) vary // (11) but for many people Prilosec provides 24 hours of complete heartburn relief with one daily dose

Finally, the modal verb *should*, although not a very pervasive device in our corpora, is used to give advice to the hearer and mitigate some sort of criticism that the speaker may seem to be exerting on him/her by suggesting a change in his/her lifestyle, or habits that implies the use of the product. In the following extract, the speaker is trying to persuade H to purchase his/her service and states that H's home is the place where he and his family "should be safe". However, the line of arguments that S presents, indicates that this situation is more a chimera than anything else, because it is more than likely that certain dangers may turn our home into an unsafe place. Drawing on Hyland (1998: 114) I agree on the fact that the use of the epistemic "should" is certainly odd in that it combines subjectivity, or the writer's attitude towards the proposition, and logical assumption, inferred from known facts. In the *HUD and FHA* commercial (above), logical assumption follows from the different possible reasons that may weaken the idea of safety at home.

In the following extracts speakers are just pointing to what they think the course of action that H should take is, and thus offering him/her a piece of advice. Moreover, the two characters seem to be close friends, and that is why one of them recommends the use of the card to the other. As Haverkate has already pointed out, we only accept advice from those

people most close to us (1994). Therefore, the advertiser sees H as a friend, and offers him/her a product that will inevitably redound to his/her benefit, fulfilling some need or desire. The advice is also mitigated by previously mentioning the justifications for the reasonableness of the purchase of the product or service, and by continuing with the enumeration of different ones. By stating that other customers have already benefited from it, the implication that we can also get the same benefits and save money, is inferred, among others. In this case, the presentation of a dialogue between two ordinary characters, the audience is implicitly offered the reasons as to why they should use the Prescription card: it can get all of us discounts at the pharmacy, it covers all members in our household, and there is no claim form. Usually, advertisers conclude the exposition of reasons by appealing to H and advising or suggesting him/her to buy:

PEOPLES PRESCRIPTION PLAN.

Voice over (1) That's why you *should* (P-1) call now to join the People Prescription Plan // (2) Now just for one low monthly fee // (3) you get the lowest price this plan can offer // (4) In fact our members have already saved over twenty million dollars on their prescription drugs // (5) Get up to half of the cost of eyes glasses // (6) and contact lenses // (7) You *can* also (P-1) save on hearing aids, vitamins // (8) even health equipment // (9) It's easy // (10) Just show your prescription card // (11) and there's no claim forms // (12) So call today // (13) Call 1-800-356-2600.

Another of the most pervading impersonal device found in our corpora is *P-9: Nominalize*. This strategy can be said to comply with the essence of the TV commercial, namely, it presents a new product to an audience, and the most of nouns used refer to the product, features or parts of the product, the benefits offered, or the people connected with it. Thus, this practice seems to be quite intrinsic to this type of discourse. The linguist output obtained by means of this strategy is a more formal type of discourse and the dilution of the doer's identity since, and following Brown and Levinson's words (1978: 212-213): "...in English, degrees of negative politeness run hand in hand with degrees of nouniness...The more nouny an expression, the more removed an actor is from doing or feeling or being something". In our corpora, the use of nouns is clearly associated with the product and its benefits, as illustrated by the following extracts:

BRITANNIC ASSURANCE.

(1) Sorting out (P-9) money matters (P-9) on your own can be a worry (P-9).

STANDARD LIFE MORTGAGES.

[...] (4) a mortgage that allows you payment holidays (P-9) // (5) EVERY year /.../  
(6) A mortgage with a low rate of interest (P-9) [...] (8) there's no arrangement fees (P-9)  
// (9) no legal fees (P-9) // (10) and no evaluation fees.

OFF MOSQUITO COIL.

Voice over (1) Did torches and candles bring too much togetherness (P-9) to your get togethers (P-9)?.

Finally, the last sub-strategy that serves the purpose of dissociating S and H from the infringement is *P-8: State as a general rule*, which complements the sub-strategy P-7. As

an impersonalizing device, S softens the imposition by calling on the experience and expertise of qualified professionals on the matter, such as doctors or scientists, in the case of advertising drugs, shampoos or pharmacy related products; the good judgement and wisdom of moms is called on, as far as babies and their care are concerned; on the results offered by a survey, or on statements that are stated as general rules. By means of this sub-strategy, S also emphasizes the interest for H in offering him/her a product that is recommended by the best professionals, and that has been approved after many tests by a board of experts. The persuasive force of the commercial, is somewhat increased. Not in vain, generalizations and persuasion are somehow related: “la generalización, desde luego, tiene como fin aumentar la fuerza persuasiva de la aserción” (Haverkate (1994: 133)).

The following examples illustrate the use of this sub-strategy. In the 10-10-321 commercial, S presents some general statement: “Change is taking place all over America”, thus implying that if we are part of America, we are part of the change, or the change inevitably has to affect us somehow. The *Nizoral* commercial states that scientists have proved the importance of yeast as a cause of dandruff, and promises that *Nizoral* kills yeast; *Huggies* appeal to mom’s knowledge of what is best for the babies’ bottoms, among some examples. The other commercials appeal to the fact that *Gold Bond* and *KY Silk-e* is medicated and the number one recommended brand by doctors, implying that doctors prescribe it; or resort to the wisdom of women, who for 30 years have made *Dove* their favorite beauty soap, etc.

NIZORAL.

[...] which *scientists* (P-8) now know can be a leading cause of dandruff’.

DOVE BEAUTY BARS.

(1) *Time’s changed* (P-8) // (2) *we change* (P-8) // (3) *but for over 30 years women* have made Dove the number one beauty bar (P-8).

HUGGIES.

(1) Most *moms* know that the natural way for babies’ bottoms to stay healthy is for them not to wear nappies (P-8).

GOLD BOND.

[...] (5) *Gold Bond* // (6) *more than a more than a moisturizer it’s medicated* (P-8).

#### 4. Conclusions

The analysis of mitigation in the discourse of TV commercials, drawing on Brown and Levinson’s framework (1987, 1978) for the codification of negative politeness, shows that mitigation plays a key role in the discourse of TV advertising since the macro-speech act constitutes and poses a FTA to H’s negative face, and needs to be mitigated for the purpose of this type of discourse to be successfully achieved. In other previous research, I have corroborated that the effect of mitigation in the discourse of TV advertising can be also achieved by means of *positive politeness strategies*. (see Del Saz (2000a)). However, negative politeness, as was defined by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), constitutes the main source of redressive action in the discourse of advertising, specially in two directions:

- Primarily, as a *mitigating device*, negative politeness strategies are geared towards the satisfaction of the H's face-needs. These devices show tentativeness and give H an opportunity to 'opt out': i.e., not to not make the FTA.

According to Fraser (1980: 341), mitigation can be defined as the modification of an speech act to avoid the unfavorable effect this may have on the H. This definition coincides with the function that Brown and Levinson (1987: 129) identified for negative politeness strategies: "negative politeness is specific and focused: it performs the function of minimizing the particular imposition that the FTA unavoidably effects". As a mitigating device, negative politeness devices help attenuate categorical claims about the product, its qualities and payoffs, which is of prime importance in the discourse of advertising where claims about the product are so common and necessary. Thus, attention to the interlocutor's need for negative face is achieved and the speaker explicitly communicates that it is not his/her intention to impinge on the interlocutor's freedom for action.

- Secondly, negative politeness strategies are also geared towards the maintenance and enhancement of Ss' face-needs. By conveying tentativeness and displaying S's desire not to impose on H's freedom of action, S is portrayed as rational and conscious of the imposition he or she is exerting on H. Therefore, S also maintains and enhances his/her positive face.

By means of mitigation devices, the speaker's task of achieving his/her interactional goals, persuading H, while informing about a product, along with that of simultaneously giving attention to the interlocutor's negative face and his/her own positive face are shown to successfully co-exist and contribute in the maintenance of social relationships in the discourse of TV commercials. Therefore, and to corroborate this line of argument, I totally agree with Carrasco (1999) whose definition of mitigatory politeness, as an alternative label for Brown and Levinson's negative politeness, coincides with and summarizes the duality of functions I have identified for the use of mitigation or negative politeness strategies in the discourse of TV advertising:

La cortesía mitigadora sería la resultante de la unión entre un acto potencialmente amenazante para la imagen y el deseo de preservar nuestra propia imagen por medio de la preservación de la de nuestro interlocutor, es decir, se trata de evitar que seamos tachados como descorteses o insociables por el hecho de realizar un acto verbal que puede amenazar el territorio o la imagen positiva de nuestro interlocutor, adoptando para ello un comportamiento verbal preferido en nuestra sociedad, el de producir subactos que atenúen los efectos del acto potencialmente amenazante, o del de modificar la forma o el contenido del enunciado de manera que la potencial amenaza del acto se vea atenuada (actos indirectos) (Carrasco (1999: 22)).



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